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ABSTRACT

Media historians have been criticized for their inability to ask substantive questions, for ignoring underlying conditions in media's past, and for their failure to relate the narration of technological developments to existing social and cultural tensions. One problem media historians confront is the scope of their research--many media histories seemingly are written without a well-developed purpose. Too often they cite only isolated instances and then ask that these be accepted as universal proofs. There is also a tendency to reduce history to a mere linear sequence where events are protrayed as existing essentially in limbo. One solution to these problems may be the use of a systems theory for historians to view and conceptualize events of its past. Another way to think of the media system is to use a "participants" orientation, examining the interrelationships among the various sectors of the media system. A more complex model is one that views the media process holistically, allowing for inter- and intra-subsytem activity. An advantage of this model is that it does not assume an unidirectional flow of energy. Influence can be exerted on any point in the model from any point in the model. Because the media are complex, a systems theory model may provide the conceptual framework needed for the study of media processes. (HOD)

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MEDIA AS SYSTEM:

A REVISIONIST APPROACH TO MASS COMMUNICATIONS HISTORY

by

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Media historians have been criticized for their inability to ask substantive questions, for ignoring underlying conditions in media's past, and for their failure to relate the narration of technological developments with "existing social and cultural tensions".[1] Jowett may best summarize the dilemma when he writes:

> In the long run this approach fails to excite the imagination, and therefore fails to reveal why an examination of the history of communications is at all relevant to the historian or to the communications researcher.[2]

This paper looks at major pitfalls in current mass communications histories and makes suggestions which may help scholars avoid some of those problems in the future.

One problem media historians confront is the scope of their research. Many media histories seemingly are written without a well-developed purpose. Too often media historians cite only isolated instances and then ask that these be accepted as universal proofs. Hence we have histories filled with anecdotes, tales of charismatic individuals, references only to those media firms listed in the "Fortune 500," and the author's collection of personally favorite film or television titles which we are then asked to accept as being somehow representative of the entire programming legacy of the medium. Written in the Baconian tradition, the events of media's past often appear to be studied for their own sake. Many of our histories are even written by actual participants of the media events. The major thrust of media history, consequently, seems to be one of documentation, as evidenced by the work of Archer (1938), Jome (1925), Rothafel and Yates (1925), and even former director/editor/writer Erik Barnouw (1966 et al) in

broadcasting; Ramsaye (1926), Hampton (1931), Seldes (1919) and Grau (1914) in film; and Thomas (1810) and Hudson (1873) in journalism.[3] Recurrent patterns are less obvious when one actually has been a part of the "history." Then when second-generation historians write, they typically regurgitate the findings of their predecessors, failing to do the necessary large-scale time-consuming primary research. Here we have Barnouw for earlier periods of broadcasting; Sterling and Kitross in their broadcast history; Emery in journalism; Knight, Mast, Fell, Ellis, and others in film; and of course the many introductory texts which offer historical abstracts so that other issues can be placed into perspective. The approach offers little to help us improve our sense of origin.

Also in these works we find a tendency to reduce history to a mere linear sequence where events are portrayed as existing essentially in limbo. One phenomenon is treated after another. Never is an attempt made to connect these independent stories. In the Humian tradition we are simply isolating phenomena. What we have is a collection of good interesting stories for which the only criterion for selection seems to be that they are indeed good interesting stories. No theoretical vision guides the selection of these colorful moments. This simple descriptive model, then, rarely provides the vision which enables us to see phenomena as anything but a series of isolated events.

Discussions by our media historians often move in this manner:

creator ⟶ technology ⟶ industry ⟶ image ⟶ society

Figure 1. Direction of Energy Flow in Media Histories.

Admittedly not all writers will give equal weight to each component of the model. Some will by-pass portions entirely. Still the basic energy flow is similar from one history to the next. Broadcast and journalism histories often begin with individuals--inventors or charismatic corporate leaders. Then we move to issues of the industry and its technology; often this becomes the major emphasis. Following this the product is occasionally mentioned. Societal issues are handled even less frequently. For film a similer pattern emerges. The exceptions may be that product (image) is almost always studied in great detail while the industrial component is deemphasized. As with the electronic and print media, societal issues are once again dealt with only rarely. Regardless of the medium--broadcasting, print or film--there is never an attempt to provide closure to the model, however. Never are stories connected. Rarely is one event shown to lead into and effect another. The events of media's past are truly presented as attractive but isolated stones on the ongoing strand of time.

Media history, then, appears to be plagued by methodological problems. This seems difficult to refute. But are these shortcomings experienced only by the media historian? They are not. The general field of history has had to deal with many of these same problems. Here too we find an impulse to write mere chronicles of the past, to glorify a situation in which the writer is currently involved, and to tell history through the actions of key individuals.[4] But this has been changing over the last century. People like Froude and Marx sought to identify a science of history. Also, stimulated by work of social theorists and sociologists

such as Weber and Lorcia, schools of cultural history emerged in France and the United States. After the second World War the social orientation was carried into a variety of perspectives including "comparative" history which emphasized causal factors and "new left" historians who sought to change some of the basic social premises on which our histories have been based. Conkin and Stromberg conclude:

> One way the historian can improve his frame of reference and thus bring more rigor to his causal analysis is to borrow from social scientists some well-developed and empirically vindicated theory about such changes or some purely analytical model that possesses proven empirical relevance.[5]

The advice might well apply to the media historian.

The questions we must pose, then, are these. How might we correct the faults of current media histories? What can we do to help breath new life into these works? One solution may be in the adoption of a totally new line of questioning as suggested in the comments of Conkin and Stromberg above. With this in mind, the use of a biology-based construct known as systems analysis might warrant examination. It already has found limited application in another area of mass communications research--the literature on Uses and Gratifications.

Through systems theory we see the world as a set of independent activities which are interrelated and ultimately behave as one. Put another way, phenomena are viewed as

> . . . a set of units with relationships among them. The word "set" implies that the units have common properties. The state of each unit is constrained by, conditioned by, or dependent on the state of other units.[6]
>
> The relationships are thus casual, functional or normative; the set is in some way "organised" (sic) through the

> interrelationships between the units. It is in this sense--in the possession of organization (sic)--that the units exist as a "whole" which is "greater than the sum of its parts."[7]

Recognized in this conceptual framework is "the complexity of interaction, . . .the numerousness of parameters which must be included in our analysis of any set of variables, and. . .the multidirectional and often indirect, yet ordered, links which exist between parameters and variables."[8] The key to systems analysis, then, is in its emphasis on the concept of organization.[9] "Whereas traditional reductionism sought to find the commonalty underlying diversity in reference to a shared substance, such as material atoms, contemporary general systems theory seeks to find common features in terms of shared aspects of organization."[10] Important here is "not what a thing is per se, nor how one thing produces an effect on one other thing, but how sets of events are structured in space and time."[11]

Also important when discussing a system is the concept of closure. Systems rarely operate within neat, prescribed boundaries. Hence we often must differentiate between "open" and "closed" systems. Still, for analytical purposes some degree of closure seems necessary. At some point, attention must also be given to a wider environment, however. Without the latter we run the risk of generating findings which consistently lack relevance.

Finally, the system must never be thought of as permanent. Not only does the natural system exist within a changing environment as has been implied above, but it also has the ability to change as the surrounding environment changes. Systems consequently have the ability to evolve. In

organic systems properties need to have balance. Social systems have no "fixed, required structure," however.[12] They are "characterized primarily by their propensity to change their structure during their culturally continuous 'lifetime'."[13] The social system units have the ability to adapt to environmental changes. They are dynamic. They are constantly in flux.

A system, then, is a set of independent activities that behave as one. Interactions take place both within and outside the units. To analyze it a unit must be thought of as frozen. At the same time one must not totally lose sight of the dynamics of the system as units interact with the environment. Consequently the system is studied with both an atomistic and macro perspective. We need to isolate units so that our task is manageable, but we also must not forget the global context in which the units operate.

Turning to media we can see how systems theory may offer a refreshing new perspective for historians to view and conceptualize events of its past. It is not that we are changing these events in any way. Systems theory simply provides the window through which to reexamine these fleeting moments.

One example of the systemic perspective applied to media is the model used by Hiebert, Ungurait and Bohn in their book, Mass Media III (see Figure 2). Labeled the "HUB Model of Mass Communication," the authors depict the mass communication process as a set of properties arranged in interlocking concentric circles (representing communicators, codes, gatekeepers, mass media, regulators, filters, audiences and effects).

There is a "circular, dynamic, ongoing progression" here as communication goes through a series of actions and reactions. The process is likened to dropping a pebble into a pool. Ripples expand outward until they are stopped by a shoreline. Then they change direction and flow back toward the center. The model shows that "many factors affect (the) message as it ripples out to its audience and bounces back." The emphasis is on a "total process."[13]

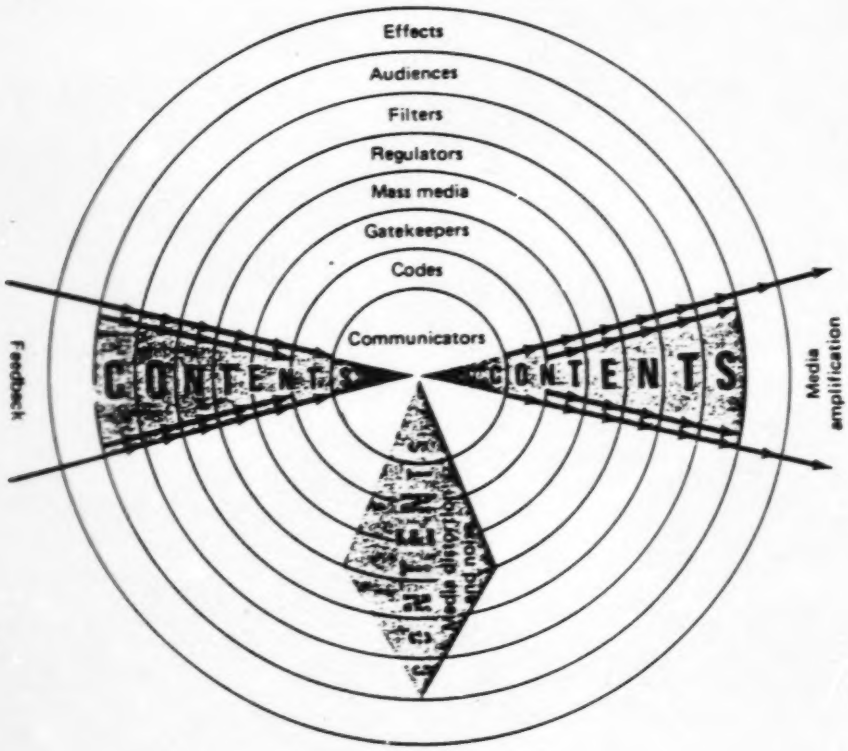

Figure 2. The HUB Model of Mass Communication. (From Mass Media, 3d ed. by Ray E. Hiebert, Donald F. Ungurait and Thomas W. Bohn. Copyright © 1982, Longman Inc.; p. 23.)

Another way to think of the media system is to use a "participants" orientation. Imagine a ball containing a number of sectors (see Figure 3). The sectors do not have true boundaries, however. Hence portions of these areas often overlap. The ball is the media system. The sectors are its subsystem. We can label these inner areas for major players in the media experience. The media ball may be divided by its industrial, governmental, and public capacities, for example. At times the subsystems appear to function independently. We also can imagine the interrelationships between the various sectors, although the areas of overlap are not necessarily permanent. This media ball does not stand in limbo, however. Outside this "media ball" is a societal field. This is the media's environment. The mass communication process and its players are constantly functioning within this broader playing field.

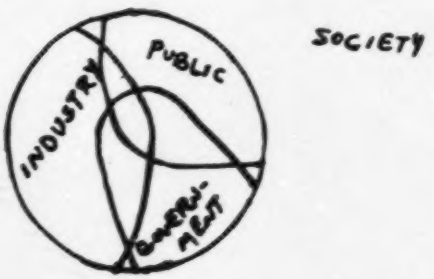

Figure 3. Media System from Participants Perspective.

It really depends on perspective. We can choose, for example, to

isolate the various media of mass communications. Here we may make each medium (radio, television, film, press) its own subsystem (see figure 4). Rather than approaching media as a single entity we will be allowing for particular industry attributes (organization and behavior) which make the medium unique. The analytical framework is basically the same, only the mechanics of study are altered slightly. We then can study each medium in terms of its technology, production, audience, distribution, etc., possibly making these further subdivisions. Essentially what we have here is a tool for viewing and conceptualizing the media process in an organized way. The historian using this or any of the above models may be better prepared to write a more objective account and thoughtful analysis of our past. Media history stands to profit through a more clearly defined sense of purpose.

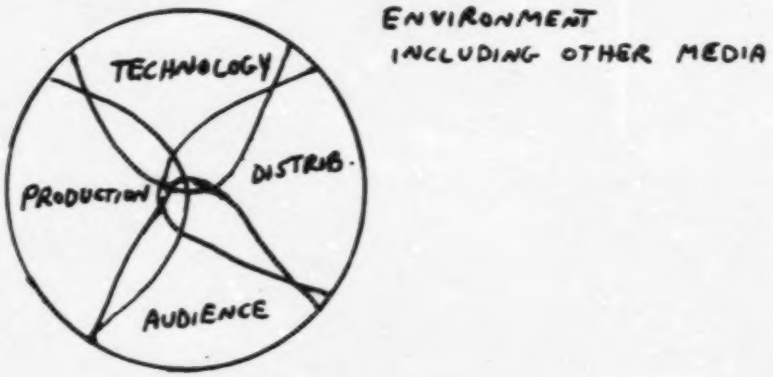

Figure 4. System of Individual Medium.

Although these models do seem to offer a more systematic approach to writing media history than has generally been used to this point, they do

still provide us with only a simplistic view of a fairly complex process. There are many stresses and strains within the system. Interactions are constantly taking place on a variety of levels. Using any of the above models a historian might find him/herself better equipped than most, but still would fall victim to an over-simplified view of the media process. What is the answer then? Perhaps it is in the use of an even more complex model.

Let us look at a model offered by Krasnow and Longley (see figure 5).[15] Although it is limited to the FCC policy-making process, it still has application to the current discussion. What the model does is graphically show some of the complex and dynamic interactions which are a major part of broadcast regulation. Major participants are identified: congress, the courts, the F.C.C., the White House, citizens groups, and of course the broadcast industry. Relationship lines between these entities are drawn. The many components of the phenomenon are placed into perspective. We can visually see how complicated the regulatory process really is. Although the earlier cited models did not misrepresent the media system, simplicity is their major shortcoming; each leaves too much to the imagination. By providing a more intricate view of the broadcast regulatory process, the Krasnow and Longley model does offer a more total picture of how the various institutions behave.

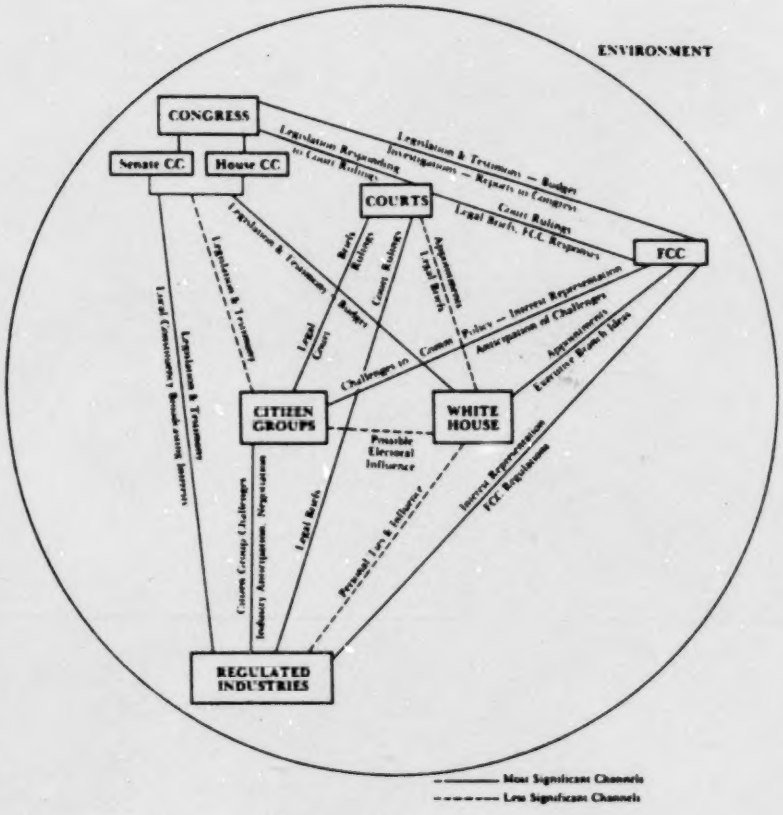

Figure 5. The Broadcast Policy-Making System. (From The Politics of Broadcast Regulation, 3d ed. by Erwin G. Krasnow, Lawrence D. Longley and Herbert A. Terry. Copyrght © 1982, St. Martin's Press, Inc.; p. 136.

The media historian is often interested in more than just broadcast policy-making, however. For this reason we need to take a much broader perspective. What is needed is a model which does for the entire media process that which Krasnow and Longley have done in describing broadcast regulation. The answer may be with a model similar to the following (see figure 6):

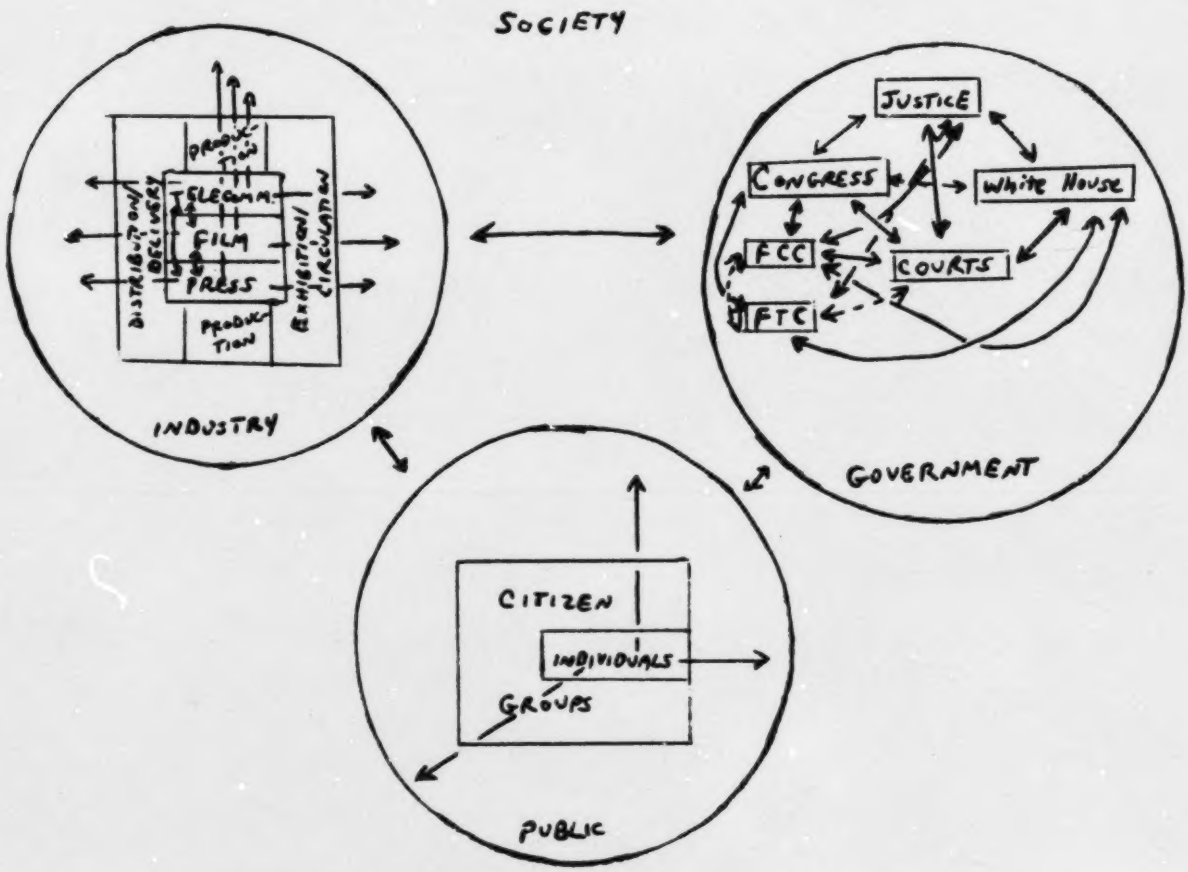

Figure 6. Holistic Model of the Mass Communication Process.

With this model we have chosen to identify three major subsystems of mass communications--the industry, government, and the public. The model allows for inter and intra subsystem activity. It is important to remember that the media process is actually a collective experience made up of many actions and interactions. The relationships are changing constantly. The process is continuous.

As we examine the diagram we find the interactive element present. Rarely will an entity exist entirely in limbo. One particular medium is not independent of the others. Hence we find the broadcast and film industries to be financially dependent on one another. A study of annual stockholder reports and public income tax disclosures of major firms in each area support this. Even journalism is not totally independent of other media as evidenced by the merger of the Herald-Traveler and Record American after WHDH Inc. was denied its application for Boston VHF Channel 5 in 1969. Although cross ownerships are no longer permitted, most previously existing broadcast-newspaper situations have been allowed to be "grandfathered."

Broadcasting and film share other "common ground." They vie for the same actors, producers, directors and writers. Telecommunications represents an exhibition outlet for the movie industry. Television turns to the traditional and independent film production centers for original programming. Film relies on broadcasting (and press) for its advertising. The list continues.

The interaction also takes place between subsystems. Media are affected by various governmental interests. The public too has input as

they buy tickets, newspapers or advertised product, and when they cry for stricter control of morally questionable programming and publications.

Graphically the process is seen as being quite complex. We literally have a story with a cast of thousands. The model becomes invaluable because it enables us to step back from our daily communicative activities to truly comprehend the vastness of the entire mechanism.

So what we have here is a model which helps us view the media process holistically. It provides us with a keener perspective on the dynamics of the system. It also becomes clear that it would be difficult at best to gain absolute control over the many behaviors and interactions which do take place within the media process. So what do we do? What utility is there in simply knowing that the process can never be studied comprehensively by any one author?

The advantage is in the foundations such a model offers the media historian. Even though an all-encompassing systemic history may not be possible, it does open doors of a more limited scale.

Let us return to the major criticism levied against media history. Specifically media history has been faulted for the limitations found in its basic unit of analysis—i.e., the use of narrow lines of questioning which tend to isolate events thereby failing to detect recurring themes. The linear structure fails to link the end of one story with the beginning of another. What we have is analogous to shiny pebbles on a beach. All are pretty to view but collectively they have little in common aside from the fact that they indeed are all shiny pebbles.

The "shiny pebbles" of media history are the many stories which are

told and retold by its authors. There are stories of how Marconi and his mother traveled to England, invention in hand; there is the tale of the radio industry's need to "bring order out of chaos" through government regulation; there are descriptions of programs and audience reactions—Amos 'n' Andy comes to mind; and then there is the mandatory relaying of details surrounding Armstrong's tragic death, and at least a few of the Friendly-Murrow escapades. There are many more. Examples can be found for every medium. Essentially all we receive are collections of facts and anecdotes that are presented as the history of media. Distressing, is it not?

There seems to be a poor "fit" between the purpose and product of the media historian. Most of these authors attempt to develop a total understanding of a media system, yet they isolate phenomena in their attempts to tell the story. The media are complex institutions which are interactive in character. The phenomena change almost constantly as organizations react to changes in the environment. How then can we isolate phenomena which do not lend themselves to isolation? How can we separate events of mass media from national politics? Can we study one medium of mass communication by totally ignoring the others, or for that matter any trend in popular culture?

Rare are works like Epstein's (1973) detailed analysis of television news operations, Krasnow and Longley's (1982) study of the dynamics of broadcast regulation cited earlier, Friendly's (1968) in-depth examination of CBS news, and Brown's (1971) pedestrian but informative institutional analysis of the television industry.[16] Yet these studies do begin to

scratch the surface. We need more, though. The general media historian should note the method. Throughout the field we need to move from pure description (asking questions such as: Who? What? Where? and When?) to explanation (questions like: How? and Why?).

One major advantage of our model is that it does not assume a unidirectional flow of energy. The energy level does not climax with each phenomenon. Rather the system constantly generates its ideas, its products, and its effects. There is no suggestion that motion must always occur in but one direction. Influence can be exerted on any point in the model from any point in the model (although certain relationships admittedly are more predictable than others). Surely this represents a more accurate picture of the media process.

To study any human institution is a monumental task and the media system is no exception. Media are complex. At times the structure of the media system changes. Other times the interactive patterns are forced to adjust. Controlling this process is not easy. But as historiographer Richard Berkhoffer (1969) reminds us, "the historian like any other analysts of human behavior must adopt some conception or model of the whole."[17] Perhaps it is time for media historians to use such an approach. A knowledge of systems theory may provide the conceptual framework which our scholarship until now appears to have been lacking.

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[5]Conkin and Stromberg, p. 110.

[6]J. G. Millar, "Living Systems: Basic Concepts," Behavioral Science 10 (1965): 200.

[7]J. Langton, "Potentialities and Problems of Adopting a Systems Approach to the Study of Change in Human Geography," Progress in Geography: International Review of Current Research 4 (1973): 128.

[8]Ibid., p. 131.

[9]P. R. Monge, "The Systems Perspective as a Theoretical Basis for the Study of Human Communication," Communication Quarterly 25 (Winter 1977): 20.

[10]E. Laszlo, The System View of the World (New York: Braziller, 1972), pp. 19-20.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Monge, p. 21.

[13]W. Buckley, Sociology and Modern Systems Theory (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 31.

[14]R. E. Hiebert, D. F. Ungurait and T. W. Bohn, Mass Media, 3d ed. (New York: Longman, 1982), 23-24.

[15]E. G. Krasnow, L. D. Longley and H. A. Terry, The Politics of Broadcast Regulation, 3d ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), p. 136.

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[17]R. Berkhoffer, A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 188.